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## Craters

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# Craters

by Joey Brown

The rain was bad for driving and it was hard enough to see at night in the hills anyway. It was all right for the daytime, but at night Lindy couldn't see the potholes in the dirt roads once they filled up with rain water. She told him that it wouldn't have done any good to go out during the daytime, though. Then there wouldn't have been anything to see. She drove too fast when she did drive and she hadn't had much practice lately. Still, she had left the house, even though Seth said not to go. Normally Lindy would do anything Seth asked.

That made explaining that night to him impossible. The only way she had of explaining it to herself was that she was pretty sure she went a little crazy last year. It happened suddenly. She woke up early one morning, her arms tingling, and she could feel the blood pulsing through the heels of her hands as she lay awake waiting to make breakfast. For the next two or three nights she didn't sleep at all. Then another day later a panic set in. Lindy abandoned her cart with its head of cabbage, jar of crunchy peanut butter, and two pounds of ground chuck at the juncture of the meat and cereal aisles of the United Foods Supermarket and went home. She didn't leave the house again for forty-seven days.

It had happened during the winter at the height of deer season or Seth might have taken greater notice. He worked the fall and early winter guiding hunters through the hills of eastern Oklahoma. Lindy didn't like to get out much in the winter in those hills. People got killed driving on the ice. And they got shot on hunting trips, drowned on fishing trips. It seemed to Lindy that something like that was happening around them all the time. It had made the outdoors less inviting to Lindy as she got

older. So for two months after the panic, she kept closer to the house, and she tried not to move much when she didn't sleep, and Seth was busy enough with work that he was slow picking up on the change. Lindy leaned her head out the window of Seth's pickup as she moved it east over the bridge that crossed the Illinois between their place and the Harley's. Looking up, she could see nothing really but the rain as it fell into her face.

Glancing down at the road every few seconds, Lindy kept her attention on the sky. She couldn't see anything yet, but she expected the rain to break at any moment. She was afraid that arguing with Seth would have held her up until it was too late. She wanted to get out to the ridge a couple of hours early, just in case it all started before it was supposed to. So when he started in with "Lin, sweetheart. You're going to freeze to death out there," Lindy just said, "You're right, honey," and left it at that. Then she just walked out. She threw her bag in the truck and took off for the ridge.

But then Lindy had planned for this night for an entire year, a year before this trip to the ridge. Otherwise she would have really meant it when she told Seth she wouldn't go. Just as that tense deer season was coming to an end, Seth decided they should go to Houston for a vacation. For days before they left, Lindy was numb thinking about the trip. She knew she couldn't tell Seth that she was afraid to leave the house. But in the end, the whole trip came out better than she thought it would. On the way down, she had kept her face toward her window and had tried to quietly imitate Lamaze breathing techniques to keep from vomiting. But each day of the trip, a little at a time, Lindy calmed down. On their last day in Houston, when they had discovered the Quadrantids in the meteorite display cases, Lindy knew that she had found something to put her fears in focus.

Lindy had written a note to herself the day they'd come back from the Johnson Space Center. They'd had it in a big case with some other rocks. There had been a card displayed with it that had all the information about it neatly typed: Meteorite. 21.6 pounds. Original weight one ton or more. Discovered in Lost City, Oklahoma, January 9, 1970 after a Quadrantids Meteor Shower. Lindy had stood in front of the case long enough to memorize all the information. Then she wrote it down on a sheet of pink note paper and stuck it to the refrigerator with an Oreo magnet within two minutes of getting home: Quadrantids on January 4, the date they were due next.

It was about the most amazing thing to ever happen to Lindy. Meteors falling in Oklahoma. And she didn't live fifteen miles from Lost City, maybe not even twelve, and she'd been alive when it had happened, and no one had ever told her about it. It had taken more than twenty years for her to find out and Seth said he hadn't heard about it either. When she had first seen the rock, it hadn't seemed like much. She and Seth had both been a little surprised to see the meteorite, all the way from Lost City, such a painfully quiet place.

"Isn't that something?" Lindy had had to smile about it.

"Well, hon. When you've seen one moon rock..."

"It's not a moon rock."

"Space rock, then." Seth had leaned close to the glass for a second and Lindy thought he might try to get interested in the meteorite just for her sake. She looked toward the glass and saw the edges of her face reflected around the meteor. Next to hers, Seth's face was also reflected, sharply, with clear eyes. But he hadn't been looking at the meteorite. He instead made room for an impatient Korean family anxious to see more rocks. He

had smiled, but not the same as Lindy. He hadn't understood and she didn't, couldn't explain, and it had become another of the things they were never going to be able to talk about. For twenty-four years of marriage Lindy had put her life into his hands. Still she knew he sometimes saw her at 40 as he had at 17. There were still things Lindy knew she could never really say to Seth.

At those moments like the one in front of the case, Seth would push loose strands of her hair back into its braid and would hold his large hand against her throat. "Don't get too worked up about it. It's no big deal," he would say, just as he had said then about the rock.

But it became a big deal to Lindy. She became fascinated by the rock that had spent so many years traveling only to meet its end in the same hills where she lived. She'd gone back to the display and memorized everything on the card about the rock from Lost City. Even though he had asked a couple of times in the year that followed what the note on the refrigerator meant, Lindy didn't try again to talk to Seth about that trip or the meteorite.

Lindy looked down in time to maneuver the red Chevy diesel around the corner. Then she pulled it to a quick stop in the bar ditch just off the road. She took the keys and her canvas bag. The rain was stopping, just in time for the meteor shower she expected just after midnight. A whole year of waiting and the words, "just in time" were all she could think.

Taking two strands of the wire gingerly between two fingers, Lindy stepped through the barbed wire fence that marked the far northern rim of their property. They had a few thousand acres of wooded acres that were essentially worthless, except for the stretch along the river. Seth made their living from a concession where he rented canoes and took tourists on trips up and down the Illinois. Most of the time, Lindy was glad to see the sea-

son come. It was the only time she ever talked to many people. She listened to them say how glad they were to be away from the office, the factory, the rigs. They always talked of how tired they were and how the water and the green life gave them rest. Lindy always found herself reluctant to say what made her tired. And although she listened intently to each person who came to their concession, she never told anyone that the green hills frightened her. She never said that she sometimes thought that the scrub oaks were growing over her house, pressing it into the earth, leaving her trapped but safe somehow. She never went in the river much, except to dangle her feet in it once in a while. It felt like ice water to Lindy, even in July.

Getting there in the truck took several minutes, but once Lindy hiked back over the ground to the ridge she could see their house. South and back across the river. Really she could only see the lights glowing through the screen of scrub oaks. Seth was waiting up for her. He worried about her any time she went out of the house. It had always been like that, even before she got scared. She knew this would be a long night for him.

Lindy found a flat spot then took the plastic tablecloth out of the bag and spread it on the ground. The blue plastic had a rather large hole where frayed bits of the white backing stuck out. But it covered enough of the ground to keep Lindy from getting wet. She took the binoculars out of the bag, placing them beside her.

On her back on the slick tablecloth, Lindy could see nothing but sky. The clouds had given way to a pale smattering of stars. Lindy hoped they would fall no further. She could not afford to have the brief minutes the meteors would be visible to be obscured by stars that shone out of rights. She snuggled deep inside her coat, feeling the cold of the dead Johnson grass reeds through the plastic. The ground was frozen. Lying there made

Lindy think of an article she read once about funerals in Michigan. People who died in Michigan during the winter didn't get buried. They waited in storage until spring. She could remember telling Seth about it.

"Huh," he had said, "That's interesting."

"Interesting? Doesn't that make you sad?"

Lindy could remember watching him over the expanse of the kitchen table. It had been dark out, wind rustling the blackjack leaves. Seth had not been looking at her, but at his own hands as he worked a tiny skein of red thread around a hook and a fly head.

"Why would that make me sad? I don't live in Michigan."

"But you're going to die. I'm going to die." Lindy had watched his eyes that were still looking down and away from her. "What if this happens to us?"

A smile creased his sun-reddened face. "Stick me in the deep freeze out on the utility porch."

"Seth."

"Lindy, hon. Why do you get worked up about this kind of stuff?" He raised the tip of his middle finger to his mouth and severed the red string with his teeth. "It's not going to happen."

Lindy had held the magazine folded open, pressed to her chest. "I can't think of anything worse," she said. "Being gone, waiting to have everything put to rest."

"Lindy." Seth smiled and shook his head. He extended the finger toward her, the tiny fly with its tiny dead, black eyes hooked in the hard callous on the end of his finger. Lindy could remember that moment as the time a sick, tingly sensation started deep between her lungs and lasted for days.

Out on the ridge, several minutes passed and the ground began to feel less hard and less cold. Lindy was starting to get nervous. She pressed the knob on her digital watch to check the time. She put her hand through

the strap on the binoculars and twisted it around her wrist until the adjusting rims of the glasses were pressed tight against her arms. Lindy thought about Seth in the house alone, sitting on the edge of the bed or at the kitchen table, all the lights in the house on. She sat up and looked down at the house where he waited. Whenever had he been the one to do the waiting? They had lost two babies, twenty years ago while Seth had been in the Dakotas on summer wheat harvest. Stillborn twins were buried in family graves Lindy had not seen in years. She'd had to wait four days for Seth to call and in the end her mother had been the one to tell him.

If they had had kids Lindy wouldn't have worried about him when she sat on the ridge. If there had been someone else at home to help take care of Seth if she wasn't there anymore. Her mother had said the babies changed her. So after that wheat harvest, Seth had opened the concession, and he had not left her alone again except for the overnight hunting trips. He often told her how good she was at taking care of him, that he couldn't have made it without her. But Lindy often wondered how much of that were really true. She kept their house, spent all of her time taking care of him. Still she thought he could have gotten along with anyone who waited out the tours and hunts, who could help him clean and cook his kills, who loved him and his longing

to offer protection. Lindy did not know that it made any difference that it had been her, and not someone else. He had said that he could not live without her, but since that last harvest, Lindy had never moved far enough from his side for either of them to know.

It had never occurred to her to wonder before that moment, but just then the question became large and clear. What about the craters? Lindy looked down toward the river. She knew that the rock she saw in Houston couldn't have left a crater. It was too small when it got here. But suddenly she was nearly frantic with wonder about where the rest of it had gone. Somewhere it had been torn and burned and smoked away. Bits and fragments were ripped loose and there had been bursts of cold fire. And the rocks fell through an atmosphere that ate away at them. They flaked away and were gone. The very rareness of the air killed them, almost all. And most of them weren't even enough to make a dent in the ground when it was all over.

Lindy lay back again on the tablecloth. The spot between her lungs ached and she breathed hard. They had to come now. She couldn't wait any longer. If they only would come now, she would go home and tell Seth. She would tell Seth where he sat in the house, lighted and warm, afraid for her. But they had to come soon and she needed them to come soon. Now, Lindy breathed, if they would only come now.